

FUTURE THINKING AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

TOWARDS A GLOBAL AGENDA TO UNDERSTAND,
ACT FOR, AND REPRESENT FUTURE GENERATIONS
IN THE MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

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November 2021

 UNITED NATIONS
FOUNDATION

“Since the soon-to-be outnumber the living; since the living have greater impact on the unborn than ever before... since our scientific and historic understandings now comfortably examine processes embracing eons; and now that our plan-ahead horizon has shrunk to five years or less – it would seem a grave disconnect is in progress.

Our ever hastier decisions and actions do not respond to our long-term understanding, or to the gravity of the responsibility we bear.”

STEWART BRAND

THE CLOCK OF THE LONG NOW: TIME AND RESPONSIBILITY

“We cannot betray future generations. They will judge us harshly if we fail at this critical moment.”

GRO HARLEM BRUNDTLAND

THE RIO SUMMIT

“Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground.”

CONSTITUTION OF THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was commissioned as a contribution to the UN Secretary-General's *Our Common Agenda*.

The authors would like to thank all those who have generously shared their time and expertise in the development of the paper.

This includes Adam Day (UNU), Alexandra Wandel (World Future Council), Anja Pape-Olin (Global Challenges Foundation), Edith Brown Weiss (Georgetown Law), Pedro Conceição (UNDP), Sheelagh Stewart (The Elders), Sophie Howe (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales), Tildy Stokes (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Future Generations), Toby Ord (Future of Humanity Institute), Verlaine-Diane Soobroydoo (UN Women), and Yulia Shalomov (Atlantic Council).

This paper was strengthened through discussions with the team from the Executive Office of the Secretary-General as they worked on *Our Common Agenda*, including Assistant Secretary-General Volker Türk, Michèle Griffin, David Kelly, Claire Inder, and Aditi Haté.

We are grateful for the contribution to this paper made by colleagues at the UN Foundation: Elizabeth Cousens, President and CEO; Kaysie Brown, Vice-President; and Pelle Enarsson and Jonathan Tanner of the UN Foundation *Our Common Agenda* team.

The authors would also like to acknowledge the work of the UN Foundation Next Generation Fellows: Aishwarya Machani (UK), Agnes Cynthia Amoding (Uganda), Amélie J. Mariage (Spain), Aya-Maria Rouhana (Lebanon), Jevanic Henry (St Lucia), Kartik Sawhney (India), Poonam Ghimire (Nepal), and Valeria Colunga (Mexico). The Fellows were invited by the Secretary-General to inform his recommendations on young people and future generations. They have also set out their own vision, ideas, and proposals in a report entitled *Our Future Agenda*.

KEY FINDINGS

The founding charter of the United Nations aims to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” Given the rapid pace of technological change, and the global scale and severity of challenges and risks faced by our planet and humanity, this commitment needs to be reinterpreted and translated into a coherent agenda for understanding, acting for, and representing future generations.

An agenda for future generations requires a shift from abstract concerns to an evidence-based understanding of where the people of the future are likely to be born. This understanding must be global and generate a policy agenda that is relevant for countries with large future generations. Implementing this agenda requires a broad view of the governance arrangements that increase capacity to plan and act for the future, with specialist institutions for future generations playing a catalytic and supportive role.

Demographics are a starting point for any serious examination of the future.

More people are yet to be born this century than are currently alive, but the future is unevenly distributed. Future generations will largely be born in the global south. Based on the UN’s reference scenario, 85% of people yet to be born this century will live in Africa or Asia. 71% will be born in what are currently low or lower-middle income countries and just 8% into the current group of high-income

countries. The world has 110 *Future Majority* countries, where fewer people are alive today than will be born this century, and 91 *Living Majority* countries, where a majority of the 21st century population is already alive.

A demographic lens brings three issues into focus. First, targeted investments in human development today will reduce the size of future generations but provide fewer people with better prospects and opportunities (the paradox of future generations). Second, in any plausible demographic trajectory, youth will become an increasingly precious and unevenly distributed resource, raising the question of whether economic opportunities will move to young countries or if young people will be allowed to migrate to economies that need them. Third, the political imbalances between living and future generations can only be understood from a global perspective. Today’s Living Majority countries are richer and have more geopolitical power, while Future Majority countries have fewer levers to represent citizens already alive, let alone those yet to be born.

We need a science and economics of the future.

While all societies have a concept of the future, its systematic study is a relatively recent phenomenon with its roots in the national development planning of the second half of the 20th century. Environmental issues – and climate change above all – have done the most to force policymakers to grapple with the long term, based on

increasingly sophisticated modelling and planning techniques. Fewer resources have been devoted to studying other intergenerational issues, such as violence, inequality, and education, especially in parts of the world where most people will be born in the future. Non-environmental extreme risks have also been neglected, despite their potential for catastrophic or existential impacts.

The international system should act as a hub for an integrated and coherent science of the future by investing in assessments of global risks and opportunities for future generations, and boosting the cross-disciplinary research seeking solutions to challenges they might face. By supporting the development of an economics of the future, it can create a global balance sheet of investments in and borrowing from the future and generations to come. This will help illuminate how investments in intergenerational global public goods can benefit future generations.

Our conception of institutions for future generations must expand.

A variety of institutional mechanisms have been proposed (globally) and set up (nationally) to serve as representatives for future generations. Yet, the former are yet to mobilize, while the latter have struggled to deliver on their ambitious mandates. Specialist institutions can play a catalytic role, but a broader governance lens reveals the importance to future generations of effective institutions that take decades or centuries to build, but can be destroyed in years or months. Future generations also have an interest in a range of mechanisms that help societies prepare for and shape the future, such as constitutions, frameworks for protecting




nature and endangered species, and bodies to manage nuclear waste.

Strengthened governance for the future is needed at three levels. First, broad improvements in governance in Future Majority countries are needed to create a social contract that is responsive to rapidly changing political, social, economic, and environmental conditions. Second, more far-sighted and future-proofed institutions can help all societies achieve impact over decades, centuries, and beyond, while combating pressures that mitigate against long-term thinking, including polarization, disinformation, and the speed of the contemporary media environment. Finally, specialist institutions for future generations should be repositioned to play a catalytic role, working through other institutions and helping champion strategies and actions that will create opportunities and reduce risks for future institutions.

The United Nations is already a leader in advancing the rights of future generations, albeit with assets that are scattered across the UN family and border the international system. The UN now has the opportunity to build a global platform for future generations, bringing together multiple sectors and interests to generate intergenerational public goods. As a universal and inclusive body, it can expand understanding of We the Peoples to include all the people of the 21st century – both living and yet to be born – and it can help Future Majority countries strengthen their voice and identify policies that will protect their stake in the future.

We propose three dimensions to increase global capacity to understand, act for, and represent future generations:


1. Understand future generations

-  **Pioneer a strategic approach** to generating and disseminating knowledge about the future, by working across the international system to develop a Knowledge Strategy for Future Generations; commissioning a flagship report on future generations; and making the planetary pressures-adjusted Human Development Index a core measure of intergenerational equity.
-  **Strengthen the way we value the future**, by moving from intergenerational discounting to economic models that include investment in future generations; exploring global standards to value both positive and negative impacts of current activities on the planet; promoting the inclusion of natural capital in national accounting systems; and developing an open source methodology for Future Impact Assessments.
-  **Promote understanding of intergenerational global public goods**, building a multisectoral consensus around a package of ‘best buys for the future’; developing new models and mechanisms to create incentives for investments that will deliver returns over the long term; and increasing investment in preventing and mitigating shocks with intergenerational impacts.


2. Act for future generations

-  **Create legal frameworks for future generations**, exploring the principles for Future-Just Law Making and the proposal for a legal definition of ecocide; using the UN strategy on the rule of law to increase the contribution that international law makes to intergenerational justice; and providing a platform for the further investigation of the concept of crimes against future generations when the continued existence of nations and cultures is threatened.
-  **Invest in repositories of knowledge and culture**, protecting knowledge and culture in Future Majority countries by strengthening national libraries and research capacity; creating a foresight network that includes these countries; and rebalancing the World Heritage list and ending the mass extinction of languages.
-  **Develop institutions to protect nature and the atmosphere across the 21st century and beyond**, building consensus behind a network of institutions that will make Net Zero universal, credible, and inevitable; creating institutions that can manage the rapid growth in protected areas needed to stem the loss of biodiversity; protecting genetic diversity especially in Future Majority countries; and developing frameworks that can support investment in adaptation and resilient infrastructure over long time periods.

3. Represent future generations

-  **Agree a charter or contract for the future** to promote justice between all people alive today and across

generations, protect the planet as our shared home, and safeguard the interests of future generations.

 **Promote the leadership role of Future Majority countries** through an informal alliance that will act as a forum for action and with investment in places where future generations are most likely to be born.

 **Create a global forum to provide future generations with a voice,** through a new coordinating mechanism to magnify the voice of the future such as an envoy or guardian for future generations, with a mandate to lead on the development of a science of future generations, strengthen strategies for the future across multilateral networks, incubate long-term goals, and act as an ombudsperson who represents the rights and needs of unborn generations.

INTRODUCTION

In the preamble to the UN's [founding charter](#), "We the Peoples of the United Nations" expressed their determination to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Thirty years later at the first major [global conference](#) on the environment in 1972 (The Stockholm Conference), "the Governments and peoples of the world" took another step to [recognize](#) their "responsibility to safeguard the human environment for future generations." Later In 2012, at the Earth Summit in Rio, governments [promised](#) "an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet and for present and future generations," and called for new strategies to [promote](#) intergenerational solidarity.

Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the UN Secretary-General [reaffirmed](#) that the world has a "moral obligation" not to borrow from future generations in a way that leaves them "burdened by a mountain of debt on a broken planet."

At a national level, countries have experimented by setting up new legislative frameworks and establishing guardians and commissioners to advocate for future generations. These institutions have [some success](#) in "highlighting and acting upon the big issues and challenges facing future generations." They [have not always survived](#) across political cycles, however, and have generally been tolerated only when not wielding too much power.

Globally, Malta championed the idea of a Guardian for Future Generations,

inspired by [work](#) of a renowned legal scholar [Dr. Edith Brown Weiss](#). At the Rio Earth Summit in 2012, its government [called for action](#) to address "the lack [of] an institution which could be entrusted with our collective concern for our common heritage, which is planet Earth."

Over the past several decades, variations of this proposal have resurfaced, most recently in a [report of the UN Secretary-General in 2013](#) which called for a High Commissioner for Future Generations to increase foresight and early warning, encourage public participation and understanding, and promote innovation within countries. These recommendations have yet to be taken forward.

This challenge paper argues that there is an opportunity to reframe the debate on future generations based on a shift along four dimensions.

1. From the abstract to the concrete

Future generations are commonly discussed in broad terms, as an amorphous mass of people yet to be born. While we cannot know and name the individuals of the future, we *can* explore where future generations are likely to be born and in what numbers, based on assumptions about socioeconomic and environmental trajectories. We also possess a growing number of tools that help us think systematically about risks and opportunities for future generations. For this century at least, this knowledge offers a foundation on which a strategic approach to the future can be built.

2. From the national to the global

Policymaking for future generations is concentrated in a small number of countries – most of them in the global north. But in the 21st century, the people of the future will mostly be born in Africa and Asia, and overwhelmingly in the world's poorer countries. Intergenerational inequalities are greater between countries than they are within them. Only by thinking and acting globally is a key political conundrum revealed: How can today's elites – who live mostly in richer and more powerful countries – be persuaded to protect the rights and needs of future generations who will be born predominantly in the developing world?

3. From process to substance

Debate about future generations often puts the cart before the horse. It starts with institutions and structures, rather than with the policies that are needed to tackle the most important intergenerational issues. When form precedes function, it obscures what problems we are trying to solve – and whether solutions are feasible, practical, and politically viable. Work on future generations also becomes siloed, rather than integrated into mainstream thinking in sectors such as climate, employment, infrastructure, health, and education.

4. From specialist to mainstream institutions

Institutions *for* future generations can play a role as champions and

guardians of the future, but their role is catalytic. In addition to any specialist body, we need the full spectrum of institutions – global and national, state and non-state – to have a greater capacity to think and act for the future. And as we argue in section three of this paper, future generations have an overriding (but often ignored) interest in the overall quality of the institutions in the countries in which they will be born. These institutions take a long time to build but can be destroyed very quickly.

Each of these shifts demands and creates space for global action.

The UN and other multilateral institutions have a mandate both to represent the *people* of the future and to help *states* understand and protect their long-term interests. On the international stage, advocacy for future generations has traditionally been associated with a small number of Western European countries. The universality of the international system provides a platform to increase the leverage of countries that are young today and which will have large future generations.

The international system, with the UN at its center, is also the only platform that exists for creating public goods that are both global *and* intergenerational. But this will require a [new type of multilateralism](#). The world's toughest problems are distributed unequally across space and time, creating daunting – but amorphous – challenges of the type that frequently lead to inaction. The task of generating intergenerational global public goods will require a new generation of high ambition *alliances for the future*, each of which will need

to have the insights, strategies, and incentive structures required to bring together partners in the pursuit of concrete solutions.

This challenge paper explores the role of the international system in protecting the interests of future generations through three lenses: **demographic, knowledge, and institutional**. Together, the demographic and knowledge lenses shed light on *why* and *where* action is needed, and on *what* can be done. The institutional lens takes on a tougher problem – *how* we can increase capacity to act for the future.

Based on this analysis, the paper makes recommendations for increasing the capacity of the international system to **understand, represent, and act for future generations**. We conclude with a call for a ‘compact for the future,’ which expands our understanding of *We the Peoples* to include all the people of the 21st century – living and yet to be born – and to include responsibility for the inheritance that the peoples of this century will pass to the ones that follow it.

ONE

THE DEMOGRAPHIC LENS

Demography is not [destiny](#). However, the demographic perspective provides valuable insights into where the future is likely to be born. It also helps us understand the impact of today's policies on the size and distribution of future generations.

In the 21st century, future generations are an unevenly distributed majority. Based on the UN's reference scenario, more people are yet to be born this century (10.9 billion) than are currently living (7.7 billion). Future generations will largely be born in the global south. Of the people yet to be born this century, 85% will live in Africa or Asia, compared to just 8% in Europe and North America and 6% in Latin America and the Caribbean. 71% will be born into what are currently low or lower-middle income countries and just 8% into the current group of high-income countries.

We distinguish between *Living Majority* countries – where more people are alive today than will be born this century – and those with a *Future Majority*. Living Majority countries are not an entirely homogenous group. Countries where living generations are projected to be twice as large as future generations include Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Puerto Rico. China's living generation is nearly 1.5 times larger than its future generation, while the United States has a roughly equal split between current and future generations. In total, 91 countries have a living majority.

In 110 countries, more people are yet to be born this century than are already

alive – with some having overwhelming future majorities. The future generation is twice as large as the living generation in Pakistan and Ethiopia, more than three times as large in Uganda and Madagascar, more than four times as large in Nigeria and DRC, more than five times as large in Tanzania and Somalia, more than six times as large in Angola, and more than seven times as large in Niger. By 2100, only seven current members of the G20 will also be among the 20 most populous countries, and only two permanent members of the UN Security Council (US and China) will rank among the 15 most populous countries in the world.

Actions taken by current generations can have a dramatic impact on the number of people born in this century and beyond. The global population is [projected](#) by the UN to grow to 10.9 billion by 2100 (range: 9.4 to 12.7 billion). However, an Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) [model](#) that assumes more rapid declines in fertility projects that the global population would peak in 2064, with a decline to 8.79 billion people by 2100. Decline in fertility is attributed to factors such as advances in reproductive health, women's changing roles in society, shifts in employment, as well as urbanization and even, [some suspect temporarily](#), the COVID-19 pandemic. Under this scenario, two billion fewer people would be born in the rest of the 21st century. A third [SDG Success Scenario](#) – where targets for universal secondary education and access to contraception by 2030 are met – sees the population peak before 2050

and fall to 6.29 billion by 2100, with the world having fewer people at the end of the 21st century than at the beginning. Under this scenario, 3.6 billion fewer people are born in the 21st century.

Demographic change itself reflects the manner in which societies think about the future. The choice to have fewer children is an expression of [confidence](#) in what the future holds. It is associated with a family's willingness to invest more in the long-term success of fewer children, once parents become convinced that children will survive, see a route for them to become educated and to prosper, and as parents themselves have the knowledge and tools to take longer-term decisions. When family sizes are smaller, adults also have [increased incentives](#) to save for the future via pensions, rather than relying on children to care for them in their old age. In contrast, future generations are likely to be larger if countries that are already furthest behind remain poor, fragile, and disproportionately hit by shocks and crises.

Low fertility and shrinking populations in wealthy countries will be a defining factor in the 21st century. 108 countries now have fertility rates below replacement levels, while under the UN's reference scenario, 87 countries will see their populations shrink before 2100. Six countries will lose 20% of their population or more in the UN's reference scenario by 2050 and 23 countries by 2100 in the IHME reference scenario. Outside of a catastrophic conflict or disaster, there is no precedent for societies to age and lose population at this speed. Some demographers believe that countries are converging on a "[new normal](#)" of 1.4-1.9 children per woman. At these levels, the global population would [fall](#) to 0.9-3.2 billion by 2300.

Where fertility is low, [survey evidence](#) suggests that women still want two children on average. Governments, however, have had limited success in increasing birth rates, in large part because women continue to have children later. Some argue that a [second demographic transition](#) is underway – where very low fertility is associated with a shift in “attitudes and norms in the direction of greater individual freedom and self-actualization.” The social and attitudinal changes associated with this transition could lead birth rates to stay low and to be resistant to policy interventions that seek to increase them. In any case, future generations have an interest in policies that allow women to reach their desired family size and thus in social policies such as affordable access to childcare and housing, non-discrimination in the workplace, and free or affordable education at tertiary levels.

A demographic lens brings three issues into focus.

1. **The paradox of future generations – smaller is better**

If policies put in place today are effective and equitable in the present day, billions fewer people could be born in the 21st century. An earlier peak to the global population is mainly driven by fertility declines in poorer countries, which in turn are influenced by better health and education for women and children, women's empowerment, and more inclusive patterns of growth. Rapidly aging societies bring their own challenges, but the completion of the demographic transition in the poorest countries offers better opportunities and prospects to the people born in those countries. Birth

rates are unlikely to converge on the global average when states are fragile or experience conflict, growth levels are low, and women and children face structural exclusion and discrimination. This would lead to a situation in which future generations will be larger in number, but are likely to live poorer and riskier lives, as a result.

2. Youth is becoming an increasingly precious resource

In the 21st century, many countries will age rapidly and see their populations shrink. The global population could also start to fall. Today, people under 30 account for half of the world's population, but this falls to 36% in the UN reference scenario for 2100 and as low as 21% in the IHME SDG success scenario. Without migration, the global distribution of young people will be highly uneven. Without migration, Eastern and South-East Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean are [expected to see](#) the largest decrease in the number of young people (age 15-24) by 2050, while in the least 47 developed countries, the youth population will increase by 62%. Migration flows are close to [impossible](#) to model and [predict, doubling](#) uncertainty about the size of the United States' population in 2050, for example. In addition, it is difficult to predict future migration policies which might adjust as countries look for additional labor abroad. For future generations, a paramount question will be whether economic opportunities move to countries where they are most likely to be born, or whether they are allowed to move to parts of the

world where economic opportunities can be found. Complicating this calculation are the effects of climate change which will make some parts uninhabitable, and educational investments made in young people which will determine their economic value for global supply chains.

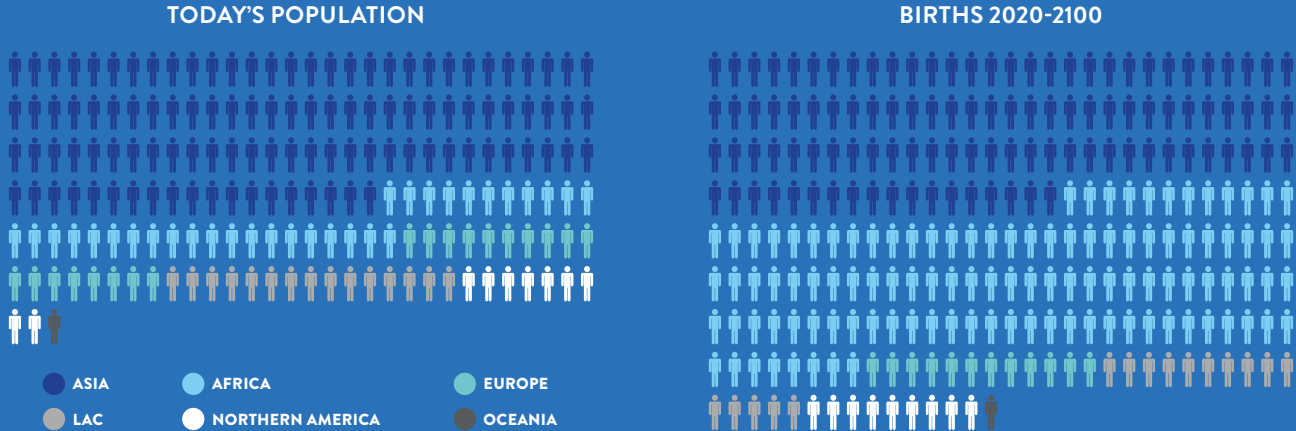
3. Between living and future generations, political imbalances are global

The [political powerlessness](#) of future generations has spatial as well as temporal dimensions. Today's Living Majority countries are richer and have more geopolitical power, while Future Majority countries have fewer levers to represent citizens already alive, let alone those yet to be born. With the notable exception of the United States, all G7 countries have Living Majorities. China is also a Living Majority country. The political economy of future generations is poorly aligned with demographic realities. As a result, there is a danger that any future intergenerational policy will be shaped by countries without a Future Majority, and almost certainly biased towards their needs. While Living Majority countries are most likely to have policy mechanisms for representing future generations, this topic is often considered a 'luxury' for poorer countries with Future Majorities whose governments are preoccupied with day-to-day responses to crises. Largely unrecognized is the close alignment between the development needs of the present (in health, education, gender empowerment, etc.) and the interests and the overwhelming majority of those who will be born in the future.

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

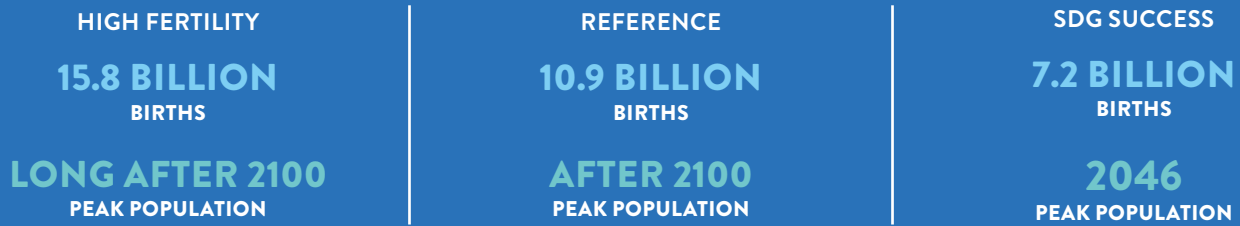
LIVING AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

In the 21st century, future generations are a majority. 10.9 billion people are likely to be born this century – many more than are currently alive. The future is heavily concentrated in Africa and Asia.



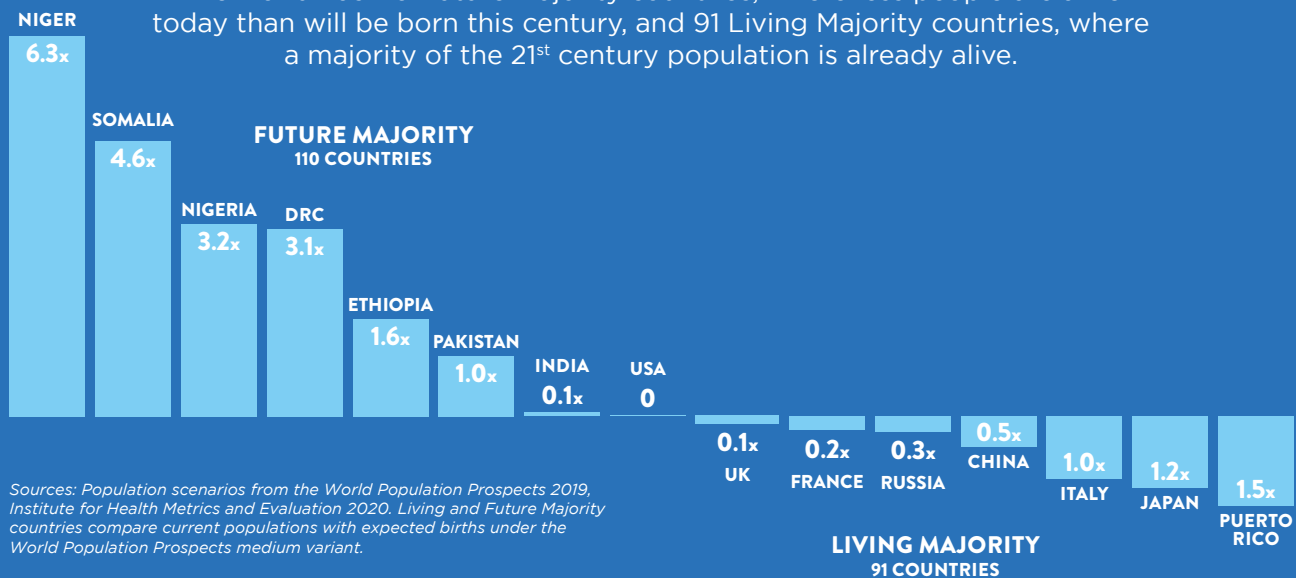
THE PARADOX OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

In an SDG Success scenario, more sustainable and equitable patterns of development lead to billions fewer people being born in the 21st century. If fertility stays high, a larger future generation will have fewer opportunities and faces greater risks..



LIVING AND FUTURE MAJORITY COUNTRIES

The world has 110 Future Majority countries, where less people are alive today than will be born this century, and 91 Living Majority countries, where a majority of the 21st century population is already alive.



Sources: Population scenarios from the World Population Prospects 2019, Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2020. Living and Future Majority countries compare current populations with expected births under the World Population Prospects medium variant.

TWO

THE KNOWLEDGE LENS

Societies have long been concerned with future generations, with all societies and cultures having a [concept of the future](#).

The Iroquois principle of making decisions in the interests of the next seven generations is often cited in literature – although it is hard to find a written source that records this exact formulation. However, one version of the orally-transmitted [Constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy](#) exhorts leaders to “look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground – the unborn of the future Nation.”

Systematic study of the future is a more recent phenomenon, with its [origins](#) in the growing commitment to national planning in the mid-20th century. The existential threat of nuclear war exerted a powerful [early influence](#), as did the broader sense that technologies were dramatically altering the range of possible futures. In 1972, the Club of Rome published [Limits to Growth](#) which drew on a model to [forecast](#) that “if the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years.” For future generations, this would lead to “a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.”

While the *Limits to Growth* scenarios continue to attract [controversy](#), the environmental dimensions of sustainability have continued to dominate research into the future. The ozone hole demonstrated the potential for irreversible damage to environmental systems. Its discovery in 1985 was a “[total surprise](#)”, demonstrating – in the [words](#) of one of the scientists who discovered it – “how fragile our environment is and that we tamper with it at our peril.” The impact on policy was rapid, leading to what Kofi Annan [described](#) as “the single most successful international agreement to date” in the Montreal protocol. Without action, the ozone layer would have [collapsed](#) by mid-century, creating an [additional](#) 1°C of global warming by 2050.

More than any other issue, climate change has forced policymakers to grapple with the long term, as scientists provide increasingly sophisticated models for how the climate will change over decades, centuries, and millennia. The latest [review](#) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change brings together hundreds of studies based on different modelling tools and techniques that “map out a range of possible futures, and help us understand their uncertainties.” Greenhouse gases can [stay](#) in the atmosphere for thousands of years, while “a large fraction of climate change is largely [irreversible](#) on human time scales.” Even if the rise in global temperatures is stabilized, today’s activities will have lasting consequences for future generations for hundreds to thousands of years.

Climate change has also led to a reassessment of how to value the future, with the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change triggering a heated debate about whether the traditional economic models that heavily discount the future lead to “[discrimination](#) between individuals by date of birth.” The aftermath of the Stern Review also saw a new focus on the economics of [catastrophic risk](#) and how much it was worth spending on ‘insurance’ to respond to the [deep uncertainties](#) of “a catastrophic risk management problem on a planetary scale.”

The investment in climate science is many times greater than any other future risk, but other long-term environmental threats are beginning to be better understood. [Planetary boundaries](#) have been mapped as part of an effort to [define](#) “a safe operating space for humanity” within which it “has the freedom to pursue long-term social and economic development.” Ocean acidification, for example, can be [projected](#) over the long term. We also have data on the tiny proportion of ecosystems that will be passed to future generations without being damaged, with [just 3%](#) of land intact (though this could be increased to 20% by reintroducing key species). The declining stock of natural capital has been quantified, with the Dasgupta review [finding](#) that “between 1992 and 2014, produced capital per person doubled, and human capital per person increased by about 13% globally; but the stock of natural capital per person declined by nearly 40%.”

Infrastructure also encourages multigenerational thinking, with a [design lifetime](#) of up to a century for some types. The global investment gap for infrastructure is [estimated](#) at \$15

trillion by 2040. Climate change will make infrastructure [obsolete](#) before the end of its design lifetime, demanding different patterns of investment in new infrastructure today that can be expected to last deep into the 21st century and possibly beyond. In the energy sector, investment must [more than double](#) by 2050 for a Net Zero trajectory, with a ‘surge’ in clean energy investment and no new investment in fossil fuels. Infrastructure and other assets worth trillions of dollars will be [stranded](#) if governments take action to stabilize climate change below 1.5°C.

While environmental risks predominate research into the future, recent years have seen increased interest in other types of risk. The impacts of conflict and violence over decades and centuries are increasingly understood, in part based on [historical analysis](#) that shows that richer countries tend not to be those that have grown faster but those who have suffered few interruptions to growth from wars or other similar crises. For [individuals](#), the impacts of loss of human capital due to conflict “can last for decades and across generations, affecting future productivity and welfare.” Conflict violence is also [cyclical](#): an historical conflict is one of the greatest risks for future conflict.

Violent crime and interpersonal violence also have intergenerational dimensions. The burden of urban violence is [heavily concentrated](#) in communities that experience multiple other forms of deprivation and [persists](#) over multiple generations. Even indirect exposure to violence has a [measurable impact](#) on children’s learning outcomes. Victimization as a child leads to a loss of lifetime earnings and may [alter](#) the biology of children through “changes so lasting that the children might even pass

them to their own offspring.” Violence against women is also [transmitted](#) through generations. Boys who experience violence are significantly [more likely](#) to be violent towards intimate partners later in life.

Other [extreme risks](#) (threats with a global reach such as a pandemic), catastrophic risks (with potential [to kill](#) a tenth of the global population), and existential risks (extinction events) are increasingly studied. The Global Catastrophic Risks report [proposes](#) a three part taxonomy: current risks from human action (weapons of mass destruction, climate change, ecosystem collapse); natural catastrophes (pandemics, asteroid impact, supervolcanic eruption); and emerging risks (artificial intelligence). The World Economic Forum has a new focus on [frontier risks](#), including lesser-known risks such as “a rapid reversal of the Earth’s geomagnetic poles generat[ing] destabilizing consequences for the biosphere and human activity.”

As Anthony Giddens argued, we must confront “a new [riskiness to risk](#),” as humanity’s technological creativity creates vulnerabilities that are unnoticed or poorly understood. Take artificial intelligence as an example. A recent [review](#) of expert opinion found little consensus about the scale and nature of the risk, or about how it could be managed. Uncertainties about the future development, proliferation, and use of artificial intelligence remain extremely high, but many researchers [believe](#) that it has the potential to “permanently cut off human civilization from a good future,” especially if military use triggers a new arms race.

As the previous section on demography has highlighted, an intergenerational

perspective can reveal opportunities as well as risks. Investing in people plays a vital – if often ignored – role in shaping the future. A growing literature explores the long-term and intergenerational impacts of investment in education, which can be [positive](#) as parents (mothers in particular) transmit gains to their children or [negative](#), as social sorting perpetuates inequality across generations. Over the long term, the intergenerational impacts of the secondary education of girls is likely to [equal or exceed](#) the impacts on earnings in the lifetimes of women who are educated (estimated at \$15-30 trillion). Social protection programs may also increase intergenerational mobility, increasing the height of children (an indicator of good health) and their learning outcomes, as shown in a [study](#) from Mexico.

In this case, an investment in living generations, in other words, is also an investment in the future, *if* this investment reaches Future Majority countries. This adds a new dimension to the already positive case for investment into access to quality education, healthcare, social protection, and political and economic opportunities for the girls and young women who will be the mothers and grandmothers of unborn generations in Future Majority countries. The importance of investing in people is especially important in the aftermath of an emergency, given the intergenerational impacts of a crisis. This is an example of where a longer-term perspective is needed [even when](#) decision makers face the most immediate pressures as remedial investments in people – children and young people above all – reduce the “[scarring](#)” that sees damage being transmitted to future generations.

Three lessons can be drawn from this review of research into the future:

1. **The science of future generations is embryonic**

Knowledge about future generations remains fragmented across sectors and disciplines. No global study provides a consolidated view of the risks and opportunities faced by future generations. At national level, some governments have foresight functions – though mostly focused on relatively near-term problems – and some have specialist institutions for future generations which undertake research. But, as already noted, these are largely confined to Living Majority rather than Future Majority countries. The fragmentation of knowledge is greater for solutions than it is for problems. For climate, there is a growing [consensus](#) about what it will take to keep warming below 1.5°C and on the [roadmap](#) to Net Zero by mid-century, but this is not matched to other priorities for future generations where there is less consensus about what action needs to be taken to secure the future. In many cases, we devote hardly any resources to asking questions with existential implications. There are, for example, a thousand times more [scientific publications](#) on ‘dung beetles’ than ‘human extinction’.

2. **We need an economics of the future**

Despite growing interest in intergenerational equity, the world has no balance sheet of its investments in and borrowing from the future. How large is the stock of accumulated

intergenerational debt? And what are the best ways of beginning to reduce it? We are equally far from an integrated understanding of the ‘best buys for the future’. How much should the present spend on insuring against the worst future risks? Where and how does it make most sense for living generations to invest in [intergenerational global public goods](#)? What additional resources are needed to invest in today’s people in ways that will benefit future generations? And what financial instruments are best able to incentivize and direct investment in the future?

3. **We need new approaches to grapple with uncertainty**

Even with considerable further research, any policy agenda for future generations requires decisions to be taken under conditions of considerable uncertainty. Today, with the help of artificial intelligence to analyze increasingly abundant data, we are in a better position to draw inferences about the future. In some cases, scenarios are being used to [explore](#) these uncertainties, with climate change demonstrating how a [multidisciplinary community](#) of researchers can integrate demographic, education, health, urbanization, growth, and technological trends into future scenarios. These scenarios underline the need for an integrated perspective. We need scenarios for the future that reach beyond climate to reveal interconnections that are currently hidden, and to enable the exploration of a range of policies for reducing risks to and creating opportunities for future generations.

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Imagine you are told you will be reborn in 2071 at random to one of 138 million mothers who will give birth that year

Based on just what you know today, what would you want to happen? What would you hope solidarity with future generations has looked like?

WHAT WOULD YOU WISH FOR?



NO CATASTROPHIC BREAKDOWNS IN GLOBAL PEACE AND SECURITY. AND NO OTHER EXISTENTIAL SHOCKS OF ANY KIND

Any global catastrophe is a threat to you, wherever you will be born or will live



NO VIOLENT CONFLICT IN YOUR COUNTRY OF BIRTH IN THE 50 YEARS BETWEEN NOW AND YOUR BIRTH AND AS FEW ECONOMIC SHOCKS AS POSSIBLE

Conflict and economic shocks have intergenerational impacts and are often cyclical



THE EARLIEST POSSIBLE CLIMATE TRANSFORMATION (PLUS INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE THAT IS RESILIENT TO INEVITABLE CHANGES IN THE CLIMATE)

Carbon budgets will be used up well before you're born. You need a rapid and equitable shift a zero carbon and climate resilient world



HUMANITY HAS MOVED INTO A SAFE OPERATING SPACE ON ALL PLANETARY BOUNDARIES

The sixth mass extinction has ended before you are born, while people are living in ways that protect the planet from degradation,



ANYTHING THAT INVESTS IN WOMEN WHO COULD BE YOUR MOTHER (LIKELY TO BE BORN AROUND 2040) OR HER MOTHER (ALIVE NOW OR BORN IN THE 2020S)

You need this investment to target countries where you are most likely to be born and the women and girls who need it most



REDUCED INEQUALITY WITHIN AND AMONG COUNTRIES, AND BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Prosperity matters to you most if it reaches poorer countries and communities - and if societies invest in young people



ACTION TO STRENGTHEN INSTITUTIONS AND REBUILD THE SOCIAL CONTRACT (ESPECIALLY IN PLACES WHERE THE SOCIAL CONTRACT IS MOST UNDER THREAT)

You have a high chance of being in a country that currently has weak or fragile institutions, or where a breakdown in the social contract could destroy your institutional inheritance



INSTITUTIONS THAT PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF FUTURE GENERATIONS AND THAT CAN THINK, PLAN, AND ACT FOR THE LONG-TERM

You need institutions that give you a voice well before you are born, but which are also far-sighted and future-focused

THREE

THE INSTITUTIONAL LENS

In 1987, the Brundtland report – [Our Common Future](#) – found that the “profligacy” of living generations was “rapidly closing the options for future generations.”

This was a political [failure](#), the report argued. “We act as we do because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote; they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions.” Governments, it said, “may wish to consider the designation of a national council or public representative or ‘ombudsman’ to represent the interests and rights of present and future generations.”

At the Earth Summit in 1992, Malta gave this [proposal](#) a global spin. It “highlighted the fact that we lack an institution which could be entrusted with our collective concern for our common heritage, which is planet Earth, and had proposed the creation of a Guardian for Future Generations.” In 1995, it followed up with a proposal that the Trusteeship Council should be repurposed as a “guardian and trustee of the global commons and the common concerns.”

The proposal for a [High Commissioner or Guardian for Future Generations](#) has been presented to a succession of summits, while the Malta [proposal](#) for the Trusteeship Council was considered and rejected by Member States (in part, because they thought it would require amending the UN charter). Most recently, the UN Secretary-General proposed a High Commissioner for Future Generations or a special envoy

of the Secretary-General in his [report](#) in 2013. And the [Group of Friends of Future Generations](#), led by Ireland, proposed the appointment by the Secretary-General of three Global Guardians for Future Generations in a report published by the Mary Robinson Centre in 2018.

At a national level, Finland was a pioneer, setting up a [Committee for the Future](#) in 1993. Since then, a handful of countries have experimented with specialist institutions for future generations – most often a Commissioner of some sort. The [Network of Institutions for Future Generations](#) identifies three types of structure: independent from government, parliamentary committees, and state bodies that report to the government. The major [threat](#) these new bodies have encountered is longevity, as they face “challenges to their existence within a few years of their creation (usually synched to an election cycle).” More powerful institutions are [most likely](#) to be closed down or otherwise marginalized, while weaker institutions are incapable of effectively protecting future generations.

After more than 40 years of proposals and prototypes, the time may now be right for mainstream uptake of independent institutions for future generations – at both national and global levels. But an over-concentration on these institutions should not crowd out a more diverse and richer picture.

At a foundational level, future generations have an overriding interest in effective institutions *of all kinds*.

Perhaps the most important determinant of a person's prospects is whether they are born in a society with good governance and an inclusive social contract, or one with [pronounced](#) social divisions and weak or predatory institutions. Within societies, "mounting evidence shows that the poor bear the greatest burden of institutional failure," perpetuating inequality with intergenerational impacts. As our demographic review has shown, future generations are likely to be [born](#) in societies that currently have weaker governance. They therefore have an overriding interest in the improvement of the overall institutional quality in countries in which they are most likely to be born.

The construction of effective institutions is an intergenerational task. Institutions take decades or centuries to build. For states with the weakest institutions, it [would take](#) 672 years to reach the state capability of Singapore at average rates of progress and none would ever reach Singapore's standards of control of corruption. Even at the pace of the fastest reformers, it would take these states 20 years or more to reach even basic standards of governance. In contrast, an institutional legacy can be destroyed overnight through a major conflict, widespread breakdown of the social contract, or a catastrophic shock. Even less serious conflicts and shocks can seriously damage institutions. This asymmetry between the creation and destruction of institutions resembles a game of [snakes and ladders](#). According to the [World Bank](#), today's rich countries are not those that have experienced unusually rapid growth, but those that have avoided dramatic losses during a crisis. Future generations need a steady accumulation of gains over long

periods of time, with each generation making a contribution, combined with resilient institutions that can prevent and manage risks. The 'shortcuts' are mostly downwards, in other words: "[avoid](#) the snakes, and don't expect many ladders."

On a second level, we have institutions that do not exclusively focus on future generations, but which have a mandate to help societies prepare for and shape the future, or which act to protect and enhance the inheritance that the living pass onto those yet to be born. As Douglass North argued in his Nobel Prize [lecture](#), institutions embody "learning through time - not just the span of an individual's life or of a generation of a society but the learning embodied in individuals, groups, and societies that is cumulative through time and passed on intergenerationally by the culture of a society."


Institutions that are, or should be, wired for the future, include: constitutions which [provide](#) an intergenerational framework that limits political choices in the short term; stores of knowledge and of cultural heritage which connect the past and the present to the future; institutions that create or protect natural assets over the long term, such as [nature reserves](#), [frameworks](#) for protecting endangered species, seed banks such as the [Svalbard Global Seed Vault](#), or [bodies](#) charged with managing nuclear waste; and sovereign wealth funds and other fiscal frameworks that are [designed](#) to share wealth between generations. Climate institutions are emerging that seek to guarantee commitments and long-term [strategies](#) to reduce emissions over decades - for example, the binding targets to 2050 and independent mechanisms for setting and monitoring

carbon budgets in the UK's [Climate Act](#). We are also seeing [frameworks](#) for investment over decades to support adaptation, including early warning systems, climate resilient infrastructure, and flood defenses. Some governments also have strategic foresight functions that are designed to help policymakers [engage with the future](#). The OECD defines [anticipatory governance](#) as the "systematic embedding and application of strategic foresight throughout the entire governance architecture."


If they had a voice, future generations might be worried at how fast their institutional inheritance is currently shrinking. Governments appear to be worth less than in the past, with [net public wealth](#) (public assets minus public debts) declining significantly since the 1980s and negative in countries like the United States. Many societies are also losing the [social capital](#) that can determine success over decades or generations. Levels of trust in institutions are currently low, with the social contract [under pressure](#). Governments are [seen](#) as neither ethical (unlike non-governmental organizations) or effective (unlike businesses). Once squandered, trust can be hard to win back. The 1918 flu pandemic, for example, [led](#) to lifelong losses of trust in institutions, while the loss of institutional trust among victims of a crisis seems to [exacerbate](#) the harms they suffer. The relationship can also run the other way as institutions that are perceived as better able to manage future risks [maintain or build](#) the trust of citizens. Levels of institutional innovation are [outstripped](#) by the rapidly evolving challenges that societies face, increasing the risk that a chain of crises will overwhelm the capacity of institutions and lead to a spiral of decline.

Future generations will suffer the legacy of mistakes currently being made by institutions. Many of today's governance failures have generational impacts. Major episodes of corruption can have extremely long term impacts, for example. Mozambique's [debt scandal](#) cost the country roughly [the equivalent](#) of its annual GDP, pushed two million people into poverty, and reduced annual per capita health and education expenditure by \$17. The scandal itself further weakened and discredited the country's institutions. Within Europe, Greece's [falsification of data](#) as it entered the Euro helped trigger a crisis with economic, social, and political impacts that spread far beyond its borders. Future generations will pay the price of the failure to address [climate](#) and other [environmental](#) risks, or to invest in [resilient infrastructure](#), and in other public goods. More generally, institutional [short-termism](#) – the lack of capacity to plan and act for the future – is a threat to future generations, especially in Future Majority countries.


A broader view of institutions encourages approaches that:

 **Increase the institutional inheritance of future generations.** Future generations have an interest in effective, accountable, and transparent institutions in their totality – and a robust social contract that underpins them. The majority of them will be born in countries that are undergoing rapid demographic and social change, and where institutions are [under pressure](#) to respond to new challenges. Governance challenges that matter most to future generations include capacity to [resolve disputes](#)

peacefully, [address grievances](#) and prevent exclusion, manage health and education systems, and build infrastructure without incurring unnecessary levels of debt. On a deeper level, future generations have an interest in the nature and culture of institutions. Are they operating in ways that build trust over time? Or are they undermining the social contract and thereby reducing resilience? In the latter case, the chances of a serious breakdown may be unacceptably high over decades, even if a society meets its goals in the short term.

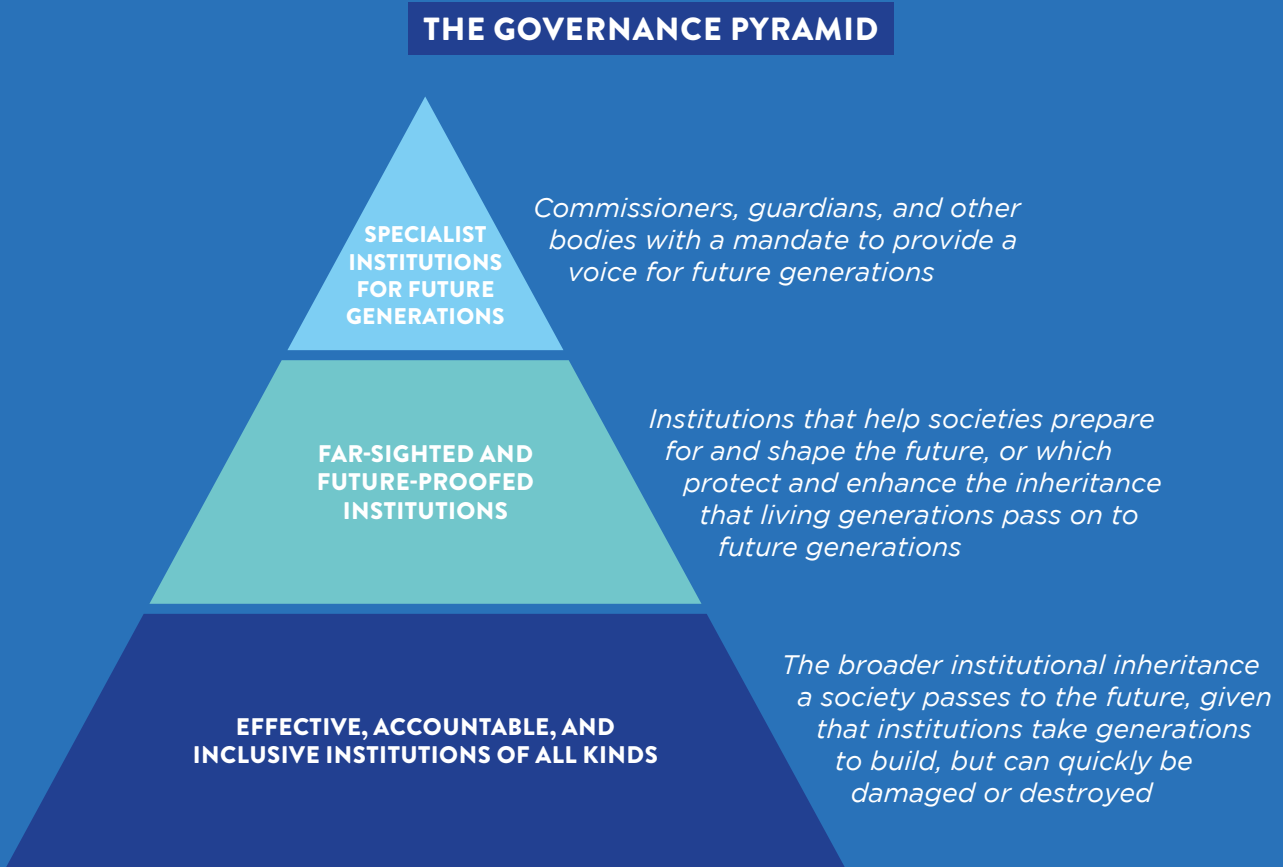
 **Build far-sighted and future-proofed institutions.** Few institutions exclusively focus on future generations, but many have a mandate to help societies prepare for and shape the future. They deal with long-term policy issues, manage risks, or make investments that the living will pass onto their descendants. There is not currently much research into how to design long-lived and future oriented institutions, with “[surprisingly](#)... few data-driven studies of what makes these organizations succeed.” Due to a combination of complex problems, impacts that are dispersed over space *and* time, and harms to a group that has no political power, another [review](#) found that “the relevant territory is that of emergent and adaptive practice, the domain of trial and error.” Institutions also face new pressures that mitigate against long-term thinking, including polarization, disinformation, and the speed of the contemporary media environment. Future generations need us to push back against these pressures, and to create frameworks and incentives that allow institutions

to achieve impact over decades, centuries, and beyond.

 **Rethink the role of specialist institutions for future generations.** Specialist institutions are not an end in themselves, but must play a catalytic role, working through other institutions and helping champion strategies and actions that will create opportunities and reduce risks for future institutions. To play this role, they are most likely to be effective when they develop a substantive agenda for the future, as the [Futures Generations Commissioner for Wales](#) has by [focusing](#) on two clusters of issues: *places and infrastructure* (transport, land use planning, and housing) and *people* (prevention of adverse childhood experiences, skills for the future, and health and wellness systems). They will also need an understanding of how they can influence change across multiple geographies, sectors, and institutions. How can they galvanize the development of networks that work together for the benefit of future generations?

GOVERNANCE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Specialist institutions can play a catalytic role, but future generations have a much broader interest in how societies are governed and whether they are equipped to prepare for the future.



As a universal and inclusive body, the United Nations can expand understanding of We the Peoples to include all the people of the 21st century – both living and yet to be born.

A GLOBAL PLATFORM FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

UNDERSTAND FUTURE GENERATIONS

Pioneer a strategic approach • Strengthen the way we value the future • Promote understanding of intergenerational global public goods

ACT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Create legal frameworks • Invest in repositories of knowledge and culture • Develop institutions to protect nature and the atmosphere

REPRESENT FUTURE GENERATIONS

Agree a charter or contract for the future • Promote the leadership role of Future Majority countries • Create a global forum to provide future generations with a voice

FOUR

A GLOBAL PLATFORM FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

This challenge paper has focused on an underrepresented majority in the 21st century – the 10 billion or more people who are yet to be born. Paradoxically, this Future Majority will be smaller, but have better prospects, if living generations act in their interests today. A larger Future Majority will face more risks and have fewer opportunities.

In all scenarios, the people of the future are unevenly distributed, much more likely to be born in the global south, and in countries that will be home to an increasingly important resource: the shrinking proportion of young people. The imbalances between living and future generations cross geographic as well as temporal borders, and can only fully be confronted through international cooperation.

Malta's proposal for a Guardian of Future Generation was first made 30 years ago, but its pioneering [advocacy](#) for the world to act to stabilize “the global climate for present and future generations” may have been more influential. The threat of climate change has prompted the [greatest efforts](#) to protect future generations (even if these efforts are still far from commensurate with the scale of the problem).

Future generations need a substantive policy agenda that aims to reduce the risks faced by future generations, while providing them with opportunities and protecting their rights. The yardstick remains the one proposed by the

Brundtland Commission: are we creating options for future generations or closing them down?

As we have argued, an agenda for the future needs to be global. It needs to represent and be shaped by Future Majority countries. And it requires multilateral networks that can bring multiple sectors and interests together to generate intergenerational public goods. We propose three dimensions for further exploration by the United Nations and broader international system to increase global capacity to understand, act for, and represent future generations.

Understand future generations

As we have argued in this paper, an agenda for the future must be based both on a science of future generations and economics that is able to guide investment in intergenerational global public goods (and in tackling intergenerational global public bads). It needs tools that help us grapple with extremely high levels of uncertainty and that can break down silos between the many sectors that hold one or more keys to the future.

The United Nations is already a leader in the science that studies the composition and prospects of future generations, albeit with assets that are scattered across the system and which do not yet add up to more than the sum of their parts.


The [Population Division](#) is a center of demographic expertise and the World Population Prospects are an essential planning tool for the future. It has the potential to make greater use of its data to increase understanding of the size, distribution, and nature of future generations (on similar lines to its analyses of [aging populations](#)). In 2020, a variant of the Human Development Index was launched, adjusted to take [planetary pressures](#) into account in order to reflect intergenerational equity. It [demonstrates](#) that “no country in the world has yet achieved very high human development without putting immense strain on the planet.” This could become an important yardstick of intergenerational equity.

The most significant institutional innovation is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which was established by the UN General Assembly in 1988. The IPCC [emerged](#) from a UN workshop where scientists reached a consensus position that “in the first half of the next century a rise of global mean temperature would occur which is greater than any in man’s history.” Over time, the IPCC strengthened and institutionalized this consensus and did it through an *intergovernmental* process. It has acted as an [anchor](#) for global understanding of how the climate is changing – an understanding that acts as “a platform for governments to enter into a serious negotiation.”

To expand its role as a center of excellence for the science of future generations, the United Nations could work with partners across the international system to:

- 🌐 **Pioneer a strategic approach to generating and disseminating knowledge about the future.** As demonstrated in section two, the fragmentation of knowledge about future generations is spread across sectors and disciplines, preventing a holistic picture emerging of the risks, opportunities, and strategies. Building on the model of the Secretary-General’s [Data Strategy](#), the United Nations could work with partners to develop a *Knowledge Strategy for Future Generations*, consolidating existing knowledge and setting out priorities for ongoing research. The Secretary-General could also commission a flagship report on future generations, with the World Bank, IMF, and other partners, building on the model of [Pathways for Peace](#). The planetary pressures-adjusted Human Development Index could become a core measure of intergenerational equity and a tool for decision making about the future.
- 🌐 **Strengthen the way we value the future.** The [Dasgupta Review](#) sets out recommendations for moving from a model that discounts the worth of future generations to one that supports inclusive investment in the future. Working with the international financial institutions, the United Nations could explore a set of global standards to value both positive and negative impacts of current activities on the planet. It could promote the inclusion of [natural capital](#) in national accounting systems, building on the UN System of [Environmental-Economic Accounting](#). It could also work with partners to develop an open source methodology for Future Impact Assessments, allowing governments, businesses, and citizens

to assess the intergenerational implications of any new law, policy, or investment, while undertaking Future Impact Assessments for its major initiatives.

 **Promote understanding of intergenerational global public goods.** The United Nations has the potential to act as a thought leader by drawing together evidence for how we can invest in human, social, institutional, and environmental capital in ways that deliver value over the long term. This would allow it to build consensus around a package of ‘best buys for the future’. In some cases, this will further strengthen the case for investment in living generations, especially in girls and young women in Future Majority countries. International finance may be needed to support these investments where there are questions of affordability. In other cases, new models and mechanisms will be needed to create incentives for investments that will deliver returns over the long term. Increasing investment in resilience and prevention will also play an essential role, given the intergenerational impacts of shocks and crises.

Act for future generations


The science of future generations provides a foundation for rewiring institutions so they can plan and act for the long term.

As this paper has argued, living generations need to protect the totality of the institutional inheritance they leave to the future, while increasing the capacity of these institutions to plan for the future and in ways that


deliver intergenerational global public goods. The 2020s must be a period of institutional innovation as we find new ways to plan for the future and to implement policies over the long periods needed to deliver results.


Rather than reinforcing the silo around future generations, the United Nations and broader international system can mainstream action across the many sectors whose policies will shape the future. It has the potential to emerge as a platform for an integrated approach to the future that will learn from sectors such as climate that already have sophisticated tools and a long-term perspective; drawing on others such as education whose intergenerational impacts are currently under-appreciated; and bring a new dimension to work on governance that highlights foresight, inclusive deliberation, and incentives for delivering impact over the long term.

The international system could focus on three types of institutions for the future:

 **Legal frameworks for future generations.** Constitutions are intergenerational documents and, where possible, should explicitly grant rights to future generations. The World Future Council has developed a set of [principles](#) for Future-Just Law Making, while the Independent Expert Panel for the Legal Definition of Ecocide has made [proposals](#) for a “fifth international crime” that would form part of a legal framework for the future. As part of its strategy on the rule of law, the United Nations could increase the contribution that international law makes to intergenerational justice. It could also provide a platform for the further investigation of the concept

of crimes against future generations, especially where the continued existence of nations and cultures is threatened.

 **Repositories of knowledge and culture.** While many believe that the Great Library of Alexandria was destroyed in a catastrophic fire, historians think it probably [declined over time](#), a victim of budget cuts, political interference, and the expulsion of foreign scholars. The world needs to protect knowledge and culture if it is to value the future, especially in Future Majority countries where national resources are extremely limited. Priorities could include strengthening national libraries and research capacity in Future Majority countries, and creating a foresight network that will help governments plan for large future generations. The World Heritage list should be [rebalanced](#) to Future Generation countries which are currently significantly underrepresented. Global support is needed to end the [mass extinction](#) of languages, revitalizing endangered languages for a new generation using digital tools and investing in mother-tongue education.

 **Institutions that protect nature and the atmosphere.** Far too little attention is currently paid to the institutions that can underpin environmental sustainability over decades and centuries. In climate, we need to build consensus behind a network of institutions that will make Net Zero [universal, credible, and inevitable](#). To stem the loss of biodiversity, a new generation of institutions will be needed to govern a rapid growth in protected areas, in


line with a goal that [half the planet](#) should be protected. We need to promote genetic diversity through global seed banks, but also through a network of [community seed banks](#) in *Future Majority* countries. We also need frameworks that can support investment in adaptation over decades and demonstrate that this investment is being spent in ways most likely to deliver results. The international financial institutions should promote the business models, regulatory structures, and financing modalities needed to increase investment in resilient infrastructure that will stand the test of time.

Represent future generations


As this paper has illustrated, the ideas to represent future generations in the international system are not lacking. They range from commissions, special envoys, and guardians to more formal commitments in international treaties. Yet, the pickup and operationalization of these ideas has been slow.


Right now, as the United Nations is undergoing a transformation in light of new and emerging challenges, we have the power to imagine better sooner.

To make it responsive to the needs of future generations, the UN will have to be representative of their concerns, including through:

 **A charter for the future.** As a universal and inclusive body, the United Nations can expand understanding of We the Peoples to include all the people of the 21st century – both living and yet to be born – and it can help Future Majority countries strengthen their voice and

identify policies that will protect their stake in the future. This charter could promote justice between all people alive today and across generations, the protection of the planet as our shared home, and action to safeguard the interests of our children and their children.

 **A leadership role for Future Majority countries.** As we have argued in this report, political power and influence currently largely lies with Living Majority countries, where populations are older and richer. The underrepresentation of the future, in other words, is compounded by the inequalities of the present. An informal alliance of Future Majority countries could begin to correct this imbalance, acting as a forum for action and investment targeted at places where future generations are most likely to be born. A priority is to highlight the extent to which the unrepresentative nature of the international system is further exacerbated when a temporal dimension is included.

 **A global forum to provide future generations with a voice.** Having argued that a single institutional fix is not the answer, we also want to recognize the potential value in establishing a new coordinating mechanism to magnify the voice of the future. An envoy or guardian for future generations could play an important role in raising the salience of the issue, cultivating empathy for those yet to be born, and in creating conditions in the global policy arena which would allow for decisions to be taken with the interest of future generations in mind. S/he should have a clear mandate and lead on the

development of a science of future generations, strengthen strategies for the future across multilateral networks, incubate long-term goals, and act as an ombudsperson who represents the rights and needs of unborn generations. In this regard, we welcome ideas of reviving and transforming the UN Trusteeship Council so that it can act as a custodian of global commons on behalf of both living and unborn generations based on its historic role providing a voice and rights to people who might otherwise be excluded and unrepresented.



Given the rapid pace of technological change, and the global scale and severity of challenges and risks faced by our planet and humanity, the United Nations and broader multilateral system needs a new agenda for understanding, acting for, and representing future generations.